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ABSTRACT

The author presents his view that the public has not been well informed about the limitations of college entrance examinations. Several educational trends are discussed: (1) since World War II, college admissions testing has underscored the classic American tension between egalitarianism and meritocracy; (2) more students have aspired to attend high-quality postsecondary educational institutions; and (3) the score obtained on a college entrance examination, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), has become increasingly important as a criterion for student selection. It is also noted that, as a result of this emphasis on test scores, those selected for college admission tend to be white, middle-to-upper-class students from well-educated families. Increased emphasis on high school grade point average as an admission criterion would result in increased selection of minority and low-socioeconomic status students. Several studies are reviewed which confirm that these test scores only predict success in the first year of college. Alternative criteria which are suggested for selecting students include portfolios, descriptions of experiential learning, and evidence of motivation and interest. The author expresses optimism that claims about what can be measured, as well as the influence of testing, will be more modest. (GDC)

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COLLEGE ADMISSIONS: A PERSPECTIVE

Presented to the

1978 National Forum of the College Board

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

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Center for Teaching and Learning
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October 30, 1978

I am pleased to be here for this particular discussion on the "Role of Standardized Tests in College Admissions, Credit and Placement" programs. While I believe that standardized testing efforts at the elementary school level - especially in the very early years - have a more pernicious quality, college level testing remains of great concern to me.

You should know at the outset, if you don't know already, that I am not an admirer of the standardized testing practices that have become so commonplace in our country. I remain unconvinced that the gains which have accrued - however one wishes to define them - outweigh in any significant manner the losses. I believe we have concentrated considerable energy and fiscal resources on a process having enormous limitations without making sufficiently manifest those limitations. We have constructed a mechanism and related support systems clothed in the language and mystique of science with restricted accessibility being a major by-product. Testing has become so much a part of our educational structures - the conventional wisdom - that its purposes do not receive sufficient challenge and any significant examination of how well those purposes match use is left wanting.[1]

I am aware that we are in a major "standards debate" today in which

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[1] I have not attempted here to outline the technical problems which exist or the assumptions which tend to undergird standardized testing efforts. The following publications might be useful for those who are not yet involved in the literature: Vito Perrone, Abuses of Standardized Testing, Phi Delta Kappan Foundation, 1977; Testing and Evaluation: New Views, Association for Childhood Education, 1975; Henry Dyer, "Testing Little Children: Some Old Problems in New Settings, Childhood Education, April 1973; Edmund Farrell, "The Vise/Vice of Standardized Testing: National Depreciation by Quantification," National Council of Teachers of English, Spring 1976; Leon Kamin, The Science of Politics of I.Q., John Wiley, 1974; Murray Levine, "The Academic Achievement Test: Its Historical Context and Social Functions, American Psychologist, March 1976; Report on Minority Testing, NAACP, May 1976; Barbara Zasloff A Bibliography on Bias in Intelligence and Achievement Testing of Children and Youth, N.D. Study Group

test scores are playing the role of Hermes. This 70's drama, unfortunately, tends to restrict our ability to address critical issues in testing at a time when we can countenance it least. My hope is that we can, at least for the sake of this particular discussion, set Hermes' message aside.[2]

At the heart of much of our post World War II debate about testing in relation to college admissions is the classic tension in American society between egalitarianism and meritocracy, alternative definitions of democracy in practice. Whether that tension surfaces forceably or remains obscured is determined largely by a wide range of social, economic and political circumstances. In periods of stagnation and uncertainty, times of crisis, which may well describe the present, arguments which tend to support meritocracy become particularly visible.[3]

It might be useful to place before you an historical perspective that may assist in understanding some of the present concerns about testing and college admissions. (This perspective will suffer somewhat from its summary nature but that is the dilemma one faces in this kind of presentation.) Prior to World War II, testing had a relatively be-

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on Evaluation, 1975; Banesh Hoffman, The Tyranny of Testing, Collier, 1964; Deborah Meier, Reading Failure and the Tests, Workshop Center for Open Ed, 1973; National Elementary Principal, March/April 1975 and August 1975.

[2]The debate about how to interpret test score declines has generated considerable verbage but not much enlightenment. Competency testing activities which are generating considerable enthusiasm in a number of state legislatures and state departments of public instruction represent one response. I am not impressed by this "movement." It is fraught with a wide range of technical, pedogogical and social problems. College Board participants might find the following papers helpful in understanding competency testing activities: Walter Haney and George Madaus, "Making Sense of the Competency Testing Movement," Harvard Ed. Review, Winter, 1978; Gene Glass, Minimum Competence and Incompetence in Florida," Phi Delta Kappan, May 1978; Merril McClung, "Competency Testing: Potential for Discrimination," Clearing house Review, Sept. 1977; A Citizen's Introduction to Minimum Competence Programs for Students, S.E. Public Ed. Program of the American Friends, Feb. 1978

[3]The popular press has, over the past year, carried a variety of features on the "revolt of the middle classes" which in many ways epitomizes this point.

nign character in relation to college admissions. Very few young people were completing high school and of that population only a small percentage considered entry into a college or university. At the turn of the century, for example, fewer than 2% of any age cohort completed high school. This number rose to approximately 20% in the early 1920's, reached almost 40% by the beginning of World War II and in my high school graduation year - 1950 - hit 52%. For much of that half century period individuals were not typically in a disasterous economic or social position by virtue of a schooling deficit. (This is not to suggest, of course, that maximum opportunities existed for those who had not completed secondary school.) As high school attainment increased by 1965 to its present level of 76%, paralleled by an unprecedented growth in the population and in the technological nature of our economic system, not having a high school diploma became a disaster of immense proportions. That the disaster has befallen the poor and the minorities almost exclusively exacerbates the consequences.

As high school attainment has enlarged, approaching a long time egalitarian goal, the goal has escalated; post secondary education is now viewed as the minimally acceptable level of education. Given the democratic ethos that fills our language, if not always our social and public policy, could we have expected anything less? Prior to World War II, those who went on to college tended to be individuals with financial resources - essentially persons from middle and upper class backgrounds - and a desire to enter a professional field which demanded college preparation. As most of you must know, the list of fields was relatively small to at least 1940; certainly it didn't include most areas of business, the college boom field of the 1970's. Only 10-12% of 18-21 year olds were in college

in 1940. By 1972, in contrast, the number had reached approximately 50%. In the wake of the burgeoning numbers seeking college preparation of one kind or another, testing ceased its benign role, becoming in the post World War II period a principal selection vehicle for our major institutions, one which fit many individuals' beliefs in "meritocracy in practice."

The theory accompanying the increased power of an aptitude or achievement test for purposes of selection was that family background and financial resources should not continue to be the principal basis upon which individuals gained access to the best of higher education's resources. Testing in this sense was viewed as a social equalizer. The theory, even as scholarship funds enlarged, never quite worked in practice. The most selective of our colleges and universities had populations after World War II that were not radically dissimilar from their pre-WWII populations. Sam Kendrick raised this issue in 1967, suggesting that too heavy a reliance on the SAT, a condition he noted, would work against diversity. He wrote, "not more than 15% and perhaps as few as 10% of negro high school seniors would score 40% or more on the verbal section of the SAT. Only 1-2% would be likely to score 50% or more."[4] Now many schools by 1970 were beginning to make less use of test scores but the belief has persisted,nonetheless,

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[4]Sam Kendrick, "The Coming Segregation in Our Selective Colleges," College Board Review, Winter 1967

that test scores are the principal determiners, especially for the poor and the minorities.[5]

In order to accommodate the growth of applicants in the postwar period, many colleges and universities expanded and new institutions were established. When I began my undergraduate study at Michigan State in 1950 there were 15,000 students. By 1960 the number was approaching 25,000 and by 1970, 40,000. And that configuation of growth was matched by colleges and universities in almost all of our States. While SAT and ACT scores during this period began to play a large role in the more selective of our colleges and determined even in some of our less selective colleges the level of enriched opportunities that would become available, they clearly were not fixed barriers to college attendance - especially if one wanted to remain close to home.

But as college attendance has become more commonplace, especially in a sputtering economy that no longer absorbs graduates in the manner that was true in the 50's, 60's and early 70's, the particular college one attends is enlarging in consequence. In the boom period we established

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[5]Harvard, recognizing the effect of the SAT on its selection process, began moderating its value after 1960, giving in the process more weight to what was called "Personal ratings." The class of 1964 was, as a result, broader in most respects from earlier classes. (See Dean Whitla, "Evaluation of Decision-Making: A Study of College Admissions," in Handbook of Measurement and Assessment in Behavioral Sciences, ed. by Dean Whitla, Addison Wesley: Reading, Massachusetts, 1968.) Harvard has, since 1964, continued to make less use of the SAT as a significant factor in admissions. While I haven't carried out any systematic review of practices everywhere, it seems clear that many institutions have moderated their use of admissions examinations. That they insist on the test score being presented, however, helps keep up the illusion, if not the fact, that it is somehow critical and that a below median score, regardless of other circumstances, might prevent entry.

willy-nilly a higher education tracking system.[6] Our upper track institutions tend to be better supported than lower track institutions - they tend also to have a much lower percentage of minorities and the poor within their student populations. They are more selective, tending to give greater weight or the illusion of greater weight to the SAT or ACT in the admissions process. Increasingly, employment opportunities for graduates of the upper track institutions have expanded in relation to graduates from lower track institutions and graduate and professional schools - which open up yet additional opportunities - are more accessible. So much for a brief historical account. It may have been a long route to the issues that I wish to raise but I believe the path was critical.

What happens when test scores are made the major factor upon which admissions's decisions are made? Those selected tend to be white, middle and upper class persons from families endowed with college and post graduate degree holders. If high school grades alone are used, those selected will come from a broader socio-economic background, with more minorities represented. Now most selective admissions institutions insist that they use both test scores and high school grades in whatever formula they use. (I have alluded to this already.) But what is clear is that a student scoring very high on the SAT is more apt to be selected than individuals with lower scores, high school grades notwithstanding. Wing and Wallach, using only the SAT scores, were able to predict actual admissions de-

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[6]Jerome Karabel is beginning to address the effects of this tracking system, especially as it relates to minorities and poor. See: "Community Colleges and Social Stratification," Harvard Ed Review, Nov. 1972, pp. 521-562 and "Social Class, Academic Ability and College 'Quality'", Social Forces March 1975, pp 381-398. See also L.C. Solmon and P. Wachtel, "The Effects on Income of Type of College Attended," Sociology of Education, Winter, 1975 pp. 75-90

cisions for several selective institutions at a 76% level.[7]

But what do the test scores tell us? They predict - and not very highly at that - first year grades. And their predictive value is not as high as that of high school grades. How important is that prediction? Does it relate as closely to the full baccalaureate program? And do the grades being predicted have much relationship to success in one's adult life?

Bowdoin conducted several studies which showed little relation between SAT scores and final standing and ultimately dropped the SAT as a requirement. To my knowledge, there has been no decline in quality at Bowdoin - though the population selected has broadened.[8] I don't believe that I need to provide for this group the extensive literature on the relationship of college grades to adult achievement.[9] Hoyt's reviews, I suspect, are now quite commonplace.

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[7]Cliff Wing and Michael Wallach, College Admissions and the Psychology of Talent, Holt Rinehart and Winston: N.Y., 1971. That Wing and Wallach were able to demonstrate so forceably the power of the SAT in actual admissions decisions doesn't support - in spite of the claims that are made - the perspective that it plays a "small, overestimated role."

[8]As the SAT declined in importance for purposes of selection at Harvard between 1958 and 1968, grades of students increased. 40% of the 1958 class was on the Dean's List compared to 51.8% in 1968. There was 10.6% failure among the class of 1958 compared to 4.8% for the class of 1968 (Whitla, p. 485). And it should be noted that a number of selective institutions never made use of the SAT or other instruments of that kind. For example, Bennington and Hampshire Colleges.

[9]Don Hoyt summarized 46 predictive studies concluding that "present evidence strongly suggests that college grades bear little or no relationship to any measure of adult achievement." The Relationship Between College Grades and Adult Achievement: A Review of the Literature, American College Testing Service, Report No. 7, Sept. 1965.

An even larger literature than was provided by Hoyt, however, exists in the medical field.[10] The entrance examination - similar in format to other admissions tests - has demonstrated little relation to medical school grades, medical school grades have little relationship to practice nor, for that matter, do scores on medical board examinations.

Are there other definitions of talent that might function as well as, possibly better than, grades and test scores as predictors of success in college as well as later life? Holland and Richards in a number of studies for ACT confirm that extracurricular, non-academic achievement/accomplishment can be identified as independent forms of talent, having negligible correlations to grades, aptitude or academic achievement tests.[11] They suggest that "if a college wishes to find students who will do outstanding things outside the classroom and in later life, then more attention needs to be given to non-academic accomplishment." How important is such a perspective? I would think enormously important. This is the major point of Wing and Wallach's research on College Admissions and the Psychology of Talent as well as that of David McClelland.[12] How one defines talent - the weight that is placed on one form of talent in relation to other forms of talent - has a potentially significant impact on our society,

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[10]John Wingard and John Williamson, "Grades as Predictors of Physicians Career Performance: An Evaluative Literature Review," Journal of Medical Education, Vol 48, pp. 311-322.

[11]John Holland and James Richards, Academic and Non Academic Accomplishment in a Representative Sample Taken from a Population of 612,000, Research Report #12, American College Testing Program, May 1966 and Academic and Non Academic Accomplishment: Correlated or Uncorrelated? Research Report #2, ACT, April 1965. See also Leo Munday and J.C. Davis, Varieties of Accomplishment After College: Perspectives on the Meaning of Academic Talent, Research Report #62, ACT, March 1974.

[12]Wing and Wallach give particular credence to what they call accomplishment characteristics - political leadership, athletic leadership, work experience, acting, writing, painting - behaviors which are ends in and of themselves. They conclude, as have others, that such factors act quite independently from grades and test scores. See also David McClelland, "Testing for Competence Rather than Intelligence," American Psychiatrist, Jan. 1973 and Michael Wallach, "Tests Tell Us Little About Talent," American Scientist, Jan/Feb 1976.

especially when important decisions result from that definition.

When Wing and Wallach applied to Duke's application pool a preference to non-academic accomplishment,[13] with minimum SAT scores set at the 50th percentile and with high school grades falling among the upper 2/3rds of a class, they ended up with a selected population radically different - broader in every respect - than the population actually selected by a formula which weighted only SAT and high school grades. This suggests, I believe, a reasonable case for seeking in greater detail what have tended to be non-traditional data and to use that data in our academic selection procedures. That we have tended to place more emphasis on test scores and grades than seems justified is becoming more clear and the need to retreat from such an emphasis is gaining adherents.

Being an historian, I tend to look for earlier efforts which parallel in some ways current circumstances. As we think about alternatives to standardized testing formats, we might wish to refer again to the neglected eight year study which involved Wilford Aiken and Ralph Tyler in the 1930's.[14] Twenty-nine secondary schools were involved in developing alternative educational formats that did not relate to the traditional requirements for college entrance. These schools presented to colleges, on behalf of students who wished to go on to college, a portfolio outlining a broad range of an individual's accomplishments. They provided considerably more information than we see today and what was presented had a potential for use that current ad-

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[13]Political leadership, athletic leadership, successful work experience, painting, acting, performing on a musical instrument, singing, etc.

[14]Wilford Aiken summerizes the effort in The Story of the Eight Year Study, McGraw-Hill: N.Y., 1942.

mission's data lack.[15]

What would students present to a college if they wished to demonstrate their fullest capabilities?[16] It might be useful to examine the implications of such a question. The College Board might enter into some experimentation with a number of selected schools, seeking descriptive formats for use within member institutions rather than the SAT or various achievement test batteries. We might in the process learn a good deal more than we now know about our entering students and thereby provide more appropriate advisement and placement.[17] Secondary schools might also begin to initiate alternative ways to present the strength of their students, using in the process a broad view of talent. By bringing much more experimentation to this system, we are certainly not going to increase the problems which higher education already experiences and we may find more appropriate mechanisms for doing what colleges and universities need to do better.

Being particularly conscious of time and recognizing that I have not addressed all of the concerns which were to make up this session, I will now comment on several other issues, if only to raise a number of questions.

We are witnessing in our colleges and universities a resurgence of interest among the 21-40 year old population. This interest manifests itself in terms of particular courses as well as degree programs.

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[15]I am aware that many schools have large numbers of applicants and because of limited admissions staff tend to desire simple quantification over descriptive portfolios. I understand this but don't accept it as responsible practice.

[16]I had that experience in relation to a selective experimental college. It was not a large enterprise but one that provided applicants, and their sponsors, room to elaborate, explain, present the broadest possible perspective. It was a process that proved particularly useful to the faculty and was viewed as a constructive experience for the students.

[17]College advising, especially at the freshman year, tends now, in most

Are our typical testing formats appropriate for this population? Should these students be required to submit a score? To what end? Is their interest and motivation for the course or program sufficient? Do we have sufficient vehicles for them to demonstrate the quality of their experiential learning? CLEP - and the American Council on Education has just entered into a process of validation for other similar programs - is certainly a useful direction, one that has been used successfully by thousands of individuals, young and old. But is the format responsive to the learning of older persons who have been removed from educational settings for five or more years? I personally don't believe so.[18]

Would we have more commitment to broader definitions of talent - to alternative means of presenting competences and accomplishments - if tests such as the SAT and ACT were more accessible, published along with their correct answer form 30 days after administrations as a recent California Senate Bill proposed?[19] Would students and counselors alike benefit from an item by item review? Again, I believe so. The single score which now comes back doesn't reveal very much about how a student dealt with the test. Is it possible that the student completed 1/3 of the testing and of that 1/3 responded "correctly" most of the time? Is it possible that a student scoring 600 and a student scoring 500 did similarly on all but a very small section of the test? Is it possible

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settings, to be quite undifferentiated. In part this occurs because colleges do not devote enough of their resources to personal advisement. But another factor is that advisors have very little information upon which to differentiate. While some persist in believing that a high or low math score on the SAT suggests a particular math sequence for a student, such a belief may not contribute to the most appropriate advisement or placement.

[18]The College Board might wish to give attention to the efforts being made by institutions such as Thomas Edison in New Jersey, Empire State in New York and Metropolitan State in Minnesota which are seeking a variety of means to certify for college credit adult learning.

[19]The new SAT Student Booklet, unlike previous versions, prints an entire facsimile of a SAT. This is a step forward but it is still not the test and it cannot be used by the participants in a manner suggested by the California Bill.

that a student provided insight into many of the questions that needs to be reviewed?[20]

If the tests were open, testing might become less mystical, less powerful in selection and possibly more useful for purposes of placement advising. Would such an effort influence high school curriculum to an even higher degree than is now the case? That is a possibility if colleges and schools continue their lack of significant dialogue and lack of intensity in seeking more appropriate articulation.

Enough for now. As the typical college age population declines and as our economy changes, we need to address more freshly issues relating to college admissions, placement and advanced credit. It is a time to establish a range of alternative directions, for finding an even better balance between egalitarianism and meritocracy, for assuring access to the best resources of higher education for all who deserve and can benefit from such resources.[21] I am aware that I have

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[20]For a period, ETS suggested that these tests, being aptitude tests, were not particularly amenable to significant score shifts from preparation programs. But a large industry has grown up around the belief that 20-30 hours of instruction can make a significant difference; that scores can be improved by 100 points or so. These schools have become, over the past two years, the subject of a major FTC review in relation to "truth in advertising." While I do not yet know the content of the report, I suspect that the review will uphold the proprietary school's general claim. The College Board itself has recently published a report which supports that the concepts, principles, etc., which make up the math section of the SAT can be taught and students who participated in a 21 hour course designed for that purpose significantly improved their scores from pre-test to post-test.

[21]Many in our country believe that access to higher education is now open to all who can benefit. Humphrey Doerman's, Toward Equal Access (Bush Foundation and College Board, 1978) suggests otherwise. Doerman notes that some 200,000 qualified students per year are not in post high school schooling because financial assistance is not sufficiently available. While we have made giant strides in financial programs for young people who wish further education, we have not yet reached a level that is equal to our capacity.

highlighted the complexities and the more negative possibilities growing out of the tests. I did so purposefully lest we forget where we have been and how far we need to go. Having said that, I can also share with you my optimism for the future. I am convinced that there will be more modesty in the years ahead about what can be measured and that testing as we know it will moderate as a significant influence in our society.